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ABSTRACT

A study investigated how content-area professors help graduate students who are nonnative speakers of English improve their discipline-related writing. Foreign graduate students (n=164) were surveyed and found to have writing experience in their disciplines. These students responded to questions about techniques professors used to facilitate writing, student behaviors in response to assignments, perceptions of what professors comment on, and factors that helped to improve their writing. Of the students surveyed, 14 were interviewed. The interviewees, from the business, education, engineering, geodetic, science, journalism, linguistics, microbiology, nutrition, and political science fields, showed the interviewer some content-area writing assignments, described problems with the assignments, and discussed their reactions to graded papers. Results of the survey are tabulated and discussed briefly, and interview findings are examined in more detail, focusing on the professors' handling of writing assignments and role as writing facilitator, student use of advisors in writing improvement--a factor not anticipated at the of professors' comments on papers, and the role of academic advisors in writing improvement--a factor not anticipated at the outset of the interviews. (MSE)

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How Professors Initiate Nonnative Speakers into their Disciplinary Discourse Communities

DIANE BELCHER

Spack (1988) has offered us a number of reasons why ESL teachers "should leave the teaching of writing in the disciplines to the teachers of those disciplines" (p. 30). Surveys of writing tasks in different disciplines (e.g., Horowitz, 1986; Rose, 1983) have revealed relatively little, Spack notes, about the nature of academic writing. According to Spack, we must do much more ethnographic work--more analysis of actual assignments, student papers, teacher responses, and classroom activities—before we can arrive at a thorough understanding of the type of writing expected of students in their content courses. Spack also points out that ESL teachers who attempt to teach discipline-specific writing may be at a serious disadvantage because they may not fully understand the subject matter of their students' papers. Unlike Freire (1972), who encourages teachers to put themselves on more of an equal footing with their students so that they can learn from and with them, Spack is concerned about the teacher in the "uncomfortable position of being less knowledgeable than students" (p. 37). A related and more serious problem mentioned by Spack has to do with the teacher's ability to serve as facilitator of the student's writing process. How can the writing teacher interact with the student's text, i.e., respond to the ideas in it, as Sommers (1982) and Zamel (1985) have advised, if that text is only partially understood by the teacher? Indeed, not just the subject matter but also the interpretive conventions of other discourse communities, the way they look at subject matter, may prove to be, as Spack remarks, formidable obstacles for the writing teacher who attempts to respond to discipline-specific writing.

What Spack does not take sufficiently into consideration in her argument against the teaching of discipline-specific writing in ESL classes is whether content-area teachers are willing and able to teach writing in the disciplines. Some recent studies on the writing-across-the-curriculum movement (WAC), which are cited by Spack herself, raise disturbing questions about this willingness and ability. In his account of the demise of the WAC programs at Colgate and Berkeley in the 1960's, Russell (1987) remarks that the very nature

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of the modern university, especially its research orientation, makes changing faculty attitudes toward writing instruction very difficult. Russell, of course, is suggesting that faculty attitudes toward writing instruction in content-area classes have not generally been positive. Fulwiler (1984) has described faculty resistance to ideas presented in workshops aimed at introducing professors to the benefits and uses of the process approach to writing in the content areas. A professor who is an extremely rapid and efficient writer, Fulwiler has observed, may have difficulty empathizing with students and understanding their need to write multiple drafts of an assignment and receive feedback on them. Large class size is another factor that can discourage professors from giving and responding to writing assignments. Fulwiler has also noted that professors who do devote time to fostering writing in their courses by, for instance, assigning journals or having student conferences may not feel that it is worth the effort, for their institutions reward them for working on their own writing, not for helping others learn to write. Of course, there have been very successful WAC programs, probably most notably at Beaver College and Michigan Technological University; yet, according to Kinneavy (1987), there have been no published systematic evaluations of these programs. The fact that the WAC movement has met with both failure and success, which Spack herself acknowledges (Braine, 1988), certainly makes it difficult to speak with assurance about content-area teachers' commitment to the teaching of writing.

Perhaps even less is known about how content-area teachers help nonnative speakers become writers in the disciplines. Horowitz (1986) analyzed fifty-four writing tasks in content courses at one university and found that they placed more emphasis on recognition and reorganization of data than on invention and personal discovery. Horowitz does not argue that these writing tasks should be different; instead, he suggests that ESL students may not be prepared for such assignments. Bridgeman and Carlson (1983) surveyed faculty in seven disciplines at thirty-four universities and discovered that faculty generally perceived nonnative speakers as poorer writers than native speakers. Curiously, when asked to rank criteria for evaluating writing, the faculty chose such global features as quality of content, organization, and development of ideas as most important. The professors felt that nonnative speakers had no more trouble with these aspects of writing than native speakers did. Nonnative speakers had more sentence-level problems, according to the faculty

respondents. These problems should not have greatly affected the professors' evaluation of nonnative writing, considering their own ranking of grading criteria. Van, Meyer, and Lorenz's study (1984), which asked faculty to rank with respect to acceptability sentence-level errors, found faculty less accepting of typical nonnative speaker errors than of typical native speaker errors (NS errors being such things as misspellings, comma splices, and faulty pronoun agreement; NNS errors being problems with word order, it-deletion, tense, relative clause structure, and word choice). Two other studies, which actually asked faculty to respond to nonnative speaker essays, resulted in somewhat contradictory findings. Mendelsohn and Cumming (1987) had engineering professors, English professors, and ESL teachers evaluate essays on a general topic written by nonnative speaker engineering students. The results indicated that the engineering professors were the most sensitive to language errors, that is, the most likely to penalize papers for them, even when the content was well organized. The ESL teachers were the least likely to be bothered by language errors. Santos (1988), in a study also using nonnative speaker essays on general topics but soliciting response from faculty in numerous disciplines, found content-area professors generally able to yield quite separate judgments of content and language use, except in the case of lexical errors, which directly affect meaning.

None of the studies I have discussed so far tells us specifically how content-area professors respond to nonnative speaker writing in the disciplines, or how such professors help nonnative speakers become writers in their fields. If we know little about how professors actually handle writing in their content classes, how can we make an informed decision about whether or not to "leave the teaching of writing in the disciplines to the teachers of those disciplines" (Spack, 1988, p. 30)?

GOALS AND METHODS

In my own study, I have attempted to investigate how content-area professors initiate nonnative speakers into their disciplinary discourse communities by focusing on international graduate students who have had some experience with writing in their fields. International graduate students should be a population of interest to us in ESL since they now constitute 44% of all international college students in the United States (Zikopoulos, 1987). At the university

surveyed in this study, a large research institution, 80% of the 2,800 international students are graduate students. Graduate students should also be of special interest and concern to us because their need to become members of disciplinary discourse communities is more immediate than that of undergraduates.

In order to discover what kind of help students received or sought, how they perceived their professors as responding to their writing, and what they thought most helped them become writers in their disciplines, I distributed a questionnaire to 200 of the approximately 720 first-year international graduate students at the university under study, i.e., those in the midst of initiation into their disciplinary discourse community. For this pilot study, the questionnaires were given out in ESL classes; thus my sample is a cluster sample, not randomly selected students, and not easily amenable to confidence limit assessment or inferential statistics (Lauer & Asher, 1988). Of the 200 students who received the questionnaire, 184 responded. All but 20 of these respondents had already had some experience with writing assignments in their fields at the graduate level. From these 164 experienced writers, I chose 14 students to interview from a broad range of fields:

	N
Business	1
Education	3
Engineering	3
Geodetic Science	1
Journalism	1
Linguistics	1
Microbiology	1
Nutrition	2
Political Science	1

These students agreed to show me writing assignments they had received in their content-area courses, describe problems they had responding to these assignments, and discuss their reactions to graded papers which they would also allow me to examine.

SURVEY RESULTS

The results of this survey indicate that the respondents have had very little time to become acculturated — as American college

students, as graduate students, or as field-specific writers. Of the 184 students who responded to the questionnaire, only 10.9% said that they had written no papers so far, while 51.6% reported that they had had to write one to four papers per academic quarter and 33.2% wrote more than five per quarter. Thus, 84.8% said that they were expected to write papers in their field during their first year in graduate school at their current university.

As for the writing assignments themselves, well over half of the respondents who had written papers in their fields (N=164) reported that they usually received written prompts for paper assignments. But note that (see Table 1) more than a quarter of the 164 students, 28.1%, said that they did not usually receive assignment sheets.

Table 1

Professors' Facilitation of Writing (N=164)

	Usually	Never	Some-times	No Response
1. Assignment prompts provided	53.6%	28.1%	15.2%	3.0%
2. Assignments orally explained in class	58.5%	28.1%	11.6%	1.8%
3. Early drafts encouraged	32.3%	57.3%	8.0%	2.4%

Professors are somewhat more likely, according to 58.5% of the students, to give oral explanations of paper assignments in class, either in lieu of or in addition to assignment sheets. It may be reassuring to know that an even higher percentage of students, 64% (see Table 2), at least claimed to feel free to question professors in class about assignments, and over 50% said that they visited professors in their offices to discuss their papers. Less reassuring is the fact that only 32.3% of the students surveyed felt that their professors encouraged them to hand in early drafts of papers. One student even wrote on his questionnaire, "Professors are busy people. They don't have time." Nevertheless, 46.3% of the students said that they do, in fact, write more than one draft, although they may not show them to anyone. As for seeking peer help with assignments, well over half, 54.3%, said that they

discussed assignments with other graduate students. Hence, they were about as likely to talk to fellow students as to faculty. Yet only 18.9% said that they would show a draft of a paper to another student. A majority of the students, 63.4%, thought that they understood why they received the grades that they had on their papers. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that they were pleased with those grades.

Table 2

Students' Response to Assignments: From Prompt to Graded Product (N=164)

	Usually	Never	Some-times	No Response
1. Question professors about assignments in class	64.0%	27.4%	7.3%	1.2%
2. Discuss work-in-progress with professors during office hours	54.3%	33.5%	11.0%	1.2%
3. Discuss assignments with other students	54.3%	28.1%	15.2%	2.4%
4. Write more than one draft per assignment	46.3%	43.9%	6.1%	3.7%
5. Share drafts with fellow students	18.9%	70.7%	7.3%	3.1%
6. Understand grades on papers	63.4%	20.7%	8.5%	7.3%

What students perceived as being important to professors (given the choices indicated in Table 3), that is, most often commented on in papers, and thus features of their writing that they needed to attend to, were, first of all, their reasoning. Fifty-three percent thought that application of theories, choice of methodology,

understanding of implications, or some other aspect of the reasoning evident in their papers was important to professors. The second most frequently commented on feature according to the students (49.4%) was their own ideas. Only a third of the students said that professors commented on the organization or grammar of their papers. Even fewer (27.4%) reported that their knowledge of literature on their topics was commented on. Word choice was thought by the students to be the least likely feature (25.6%) to be commented on by professors.

Table 3

Students' Perceptions of What Professors Comment On (N=164)

	Usually	Never	Some-times	No Response
1. Student's own ideas	49.4%	48.2%	—	2.4%
2. Knowledge of literature on topic	27.4%	70.1%	—	2.4%
3. Reasoning	53.0%	43.9%	.6%	2.4%
4. Organization	32.3%	64.6%	.6%	2.4%
5. Grammar	34.8%	62.8%	—	2.4%
6. Word Choice	25.6%	72.0%	—	2.4%

What students most often cited (78.1%) as helping them learn to write in their fields (given the choices listed in Table 4) was reading books and articles in their field. The survey does not tell us how the students thought reading helped their writing, e.g., by broadening their knowledge base in the field, by improving their vocabulary, by making them more familiar with academic genres, or all of these. Help from professors was far less often cited (40.2%). Interestingly, although, as pointed out earlier, 54.3% said that they talked to their professors during office hours about their papers, only about half that, 26.8%, considered office hour discussion with professors helpful. ESL writing classes were somewhat more frequently mentioned as beneficial. Least frequently cited as helpful were all items involving peers--discussion with fellow students

(19.5%), reading fellow students' papers (17.7%), and student feedback on drafts (16.5%). Thus, two of the items involving professors' help were ranked higher than assistance from ESL classes and peers, but not nearly as high as just reading in the field.

Table 4

Students' Perceptions of What Helped Them Learn to Write in Their Fields (N=164)

	Usually	Never	Some-times	No Response
1. Reading books and articles in field	78.1%	20.7%	.6%	.6%
2. Professors' instruction/ advice in class	40.2%	57.9%	1.2%	.6%
3. Office-hour discussion with professors	26.8%	71.3%	.6%	1.2%
4. Discussion with fellow students	19.5%	79.3%	.6%	.6%
5. Student feedback on drafts	16.5%	82.3%	.6%	.6%
6. Professors' comments on papers	40.2%	57.9%	1.2%	.6%
7. Reading fellow students' papers	17.7%	81.1%	.6%	.6%
8. ESL writing classes	28.1%	70.7%	.6%	.6%

INTERVIEW RESULTS

In many ways my interviews revealed much more than the questionnaires about how the students see themselves becoming initiated into their disciplinary discourse communities. The fourteen

interviewees not only had the opportunity to explain the reasoning behind their questionnaire responses but also, because the interview format was largely unstructured, to volunteer other perceptions of themselves as novice writers in their fields and of the help they do or do not receive. The actual assignment sheets and the completed and in-progress papers that the interviewees shared with me also served as catalysts for questions that I had not even considered in my formulation of the questionnaire.

Professors as Writing Facilitators

With respect to professors' handling of paper assignments, there was no consistency in the assignment prompts that the interviewees showed me. They ranged from the very sketchy, simply suggesting several topics, to the extremely detailed, as long as five pages, with precise format instructions. The longest assignment sheets were for problem-solving assignments. Although 58.5% of the questionnaire respondents said that professors explained assignments in class, some interviewees noted that such explanations could consist of little more than a restatement of what was on the assignment sheet. When asked how they felt about their professors' policies regarding early drafts, several of the interviewees remarked that they were actually pleased that their professors did not want to see multiple drafts. These students said that they never had time for more than one draft, either because it took them so long to do the reading for their papers or to gather the necessary data. One student mentioned that he had had to spend twenty hours running his computer program to obtain data for an assignment. He was then left with less than a day to write the paper. While a majority of the students surveyed said that they did feel free to question professors about assignments, about a third of the students interviewed asked me questions about papers they were working on, questions that they appeared to be unwilling to ask their professors. These questions tended to be either about genres, e.g., how to write an abstract or what a proposal introduction should look like, or about library search strategies, i.e., how to find more literature on their topics, and more specifically, how to use such resources as printed indexes and CD ROM. The distinction in the survey results between the percentage of students reporting that they went to professors offices to discuss assignments and the much smaller percentage who found office-hour discussion with professors useful was partially explained in the interviews when students told me that they often

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could not understand what their professors said to them. One student thought that the problem was not the result of poor listening comprehension skills but of the "abstract concepts" used by the professors. Another student reported that he was told by his professor to come back to his office when he knew more about his topic. The student never went back.

Peer Support

Regarding peers, a majority of the students mentioned in the interviews that they discussed assignments with classmates. Only two, however, said that they had actually been able to look at papers written by friends who had taken the same courses. Plagiarism did not seem to have been these students' intention; they hoped, rather, for a better understanding of their professors' expectations. One student reported that one of her professors kept files of student papers which current students were invited to read. She felt that being able to read these papers helped her immensely. While most of the interviewees wanted the opportunity to see other students' papers, only two said that they showed drafts of their own papers to peers. These two mainly sought editorial help. They routinely gave their drafts to friends that they regarded as especially knowledgeable about English.

Grades

Perhaps out of modesty or a general lack of confidence, interviewees who had received high grades on papers frequently confided in me that their grades were higher than they deserved. They said that their teachers were just being kind to nonnative speakers. These students felt that their language use did not really merit high grades and/or that they had relied too heavily on sources. Students who had received what they, as graduate students, considered low grades, i.e., less than a B+, blamed the time factor or their language use, even if their professors claimed to be more interested in content than anything else. These latter students were convinced that they were unable to do justice to their own thoughts when they expressed them in English.

Professors' Comments

The interviewees expressed little reluctance to let me look at professors' comments on their graded papers. In fact, most appeared eager to have me help them interpret the comments. About one fourth of the interviewees said that they could not even read the handwriting on their graded papers but would not ask their professors for help. Approximately half of the faculty comments on ideas and reasoning struck me as overly vague. The only comment on one paper was "Fine presentation, very informative." When the comments were both vague and negative, the students usually were at a loss. One student remarked about a comment, viz., "You're wrong here," that he thought he was right, but the professor must have some higher knowledge. Organization appeared to be a problematic feature mainly for the non-science students, that is, those in fields with no single agreed-upon discourse paradigm. Student perceptions in the survey about grammar not often being commented on seemed borne out by my analysis of the interviewees' graded papers. Some papers contained no comments on grammar at all, despite the presence of errors. Those papers that did contain comments on the grammar, either were under- or over-marked. Whole sentences would be underlined with the accompanying comment "wrong grammar," which mystified the student-author. Or, there would be wholesale appropriation of text, entire lines of text crossed out and rewritten with no consulting of the student for meaning or intention and no explanation of what the professor thought was wrong with the student text. In one case, only grammar on the first page was marked, seemingly indicating that the professor decided there were too many errors to mark or that he just stopped reading. This did not send a positive message to the student. Word choice, which questionnaire respondents had reported as infrequently commented on, was only occasionally marked on the papers shown me. However, professors' general complaints about "poor grammar" might also actually refer to problems with vocabulary deployment since matching the appropriate syntactic frames with newly acquired lexical items, or getting the right collocation, is often very difficult for nonnative speakers (Rutherford, 1988). In the interviews, students often complained to me about their inability to find the right words and worried about resorting to thinking in their first language in such

situations, something that they perceived to be a hindrance rather than a help.

Advisors' Roles

The interviews gave a very different perspective from that of the survey on what most helps students learn to write in their fields. Little was said in the interviews about reading as an aid to writing, but much was said about the ill effects of not being able to find sources or of not having enough time to read those found. What was most enthusiastically pointed to in the interviews as helping students become writers in their fields was the advisor/student relationship. The advisor-as-mentor was not revealed as a significant source of help by the survey since there was no item on the questionnaire that specifically asked about it. In the interviews, students who had advisors who were interested in them and their work noted that they received a great deal of attention and support from them. These students felt comfortable asking their advisors about their writing. One student mentioned being discouraged by a professor she had for a content course from visiting his office. According to the professor, graduate students should be able to work on their own. This student had no qualms, however, about consulting her advisor, who never made her feel incompetent or indolent when she asked for help. Another student, who had failed an advanced ESL composition course, reported that she was in the process of writing a primary research report that her advisor assured her would be publishable. Her advisor led her every step of the way, modeling the writing process for her by showing her exactly how he went about composing a research report. This same advisor held weekly lab meetings for all his advisees at which they were expected to discuss their latest findings and were counseled on how to determine their significance. Other students looked forward to the guidance they would receive from their advisors when they started work on their thesis or dissertation. An advisor's help may not always serve the nonnative speaker well, however. One student remarked that he was grateful to his advisor for completely rewriting his paper for him, but felt that he still did not really know how to write acceptable papers in his field. In this case it appeared that the advisor, although perhaps well intentioned, may have been more concerned about how this graduate student's work would reflect on him, the advisor, than on helping the student become an independent scholar.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Since most of the content-area professors that my questionnaire respondents came into contact with did not invite or allow submission of a series of drafts for an assignment, it appears that most of them have not yet made a commitment to teaching the writing process in their fields. This finding should not be surprising considering, once again, what we know of the checkered history of the WAC movement in America. Fulwiler (1984) has pointed out that WAC has generally been unsuccessful at large research-oriented universities, where responding to student writing has to compete with many other demands on professors' time. Nor is it surprising that many content-area professors may not be enlightened about or interested in using the process approach to writing in their classes when we consider that there are composition teachers who are still relatively untouched by recent composition theory. Zamel (1985) has criticized ESL composition teachers in particular for behaving too much like language teachers and not enough like writing facilitators. When she examined ESL teacher responses to 105 student texts, Zamel found that the teachers usually treated the papers as finished products rather than as drafts that could be improved with teacher encouragement and advice. The teachers also attended less to the global features of the texts than to sentence-level errors. According to my survey results, content- area professors are more likely to respond to students' ideas and reasoning than to their language, and hence to interact with student texts more in the manner that Zamel recommends than the ESL teachers she studied. Yet, other studies, such as Mendelsohn and Cumming's (1987), discussed earlier, have found content-area professors extremely sensitive to language errors. It would seem to be a truism, however, that teachers in a discipline would be better equipped to respond to the content of student writing in that discipline than would teachers outside of the discipline, e.g., ESL teachers. Nevertheless, no matter how well the content-area professors respond to content, if they only respond to the content of final drafts, then they cannot be said to be teaching the writing process in their fields.

Judging by my survey respondents' unwillingness to share drafts with peers, it appears that their content-area professors, do not encourage them to seek out responses from fellow students

during the drafting process. Of course, the competitiveness of graduate school could be another explanation for the students' apparent guardedness. In any case, my survey suggests that peer feedback is generally not highly valued by first-year international graduate students at one university. If the students were to receive more feedback from other international graduate students, it is difficult to say how much the students would be able to benefit from it. In one of the few empirical studies on peer response to ESL writing, Partridge (1981) concluded, with the help of holistic scorers, that ESL student essays were more likely to improve as a result of teacher than of peer response. Although Gaies (1985) has found in his review of the literature on peer involvement that it is usually very effective in ESL classes, he questions the value of peer work for highly complex, open-ended tasks such as composing. Mittan (1989), on the other hand, is convinced that peer review has been invaluable in the ESL writing classes he has taught. Mittan notes, however, as have many first language (L1) compositionists (see Huff & Kline, 1987), that students may need much guided practice as reviewers before they become effective respondents to each others' essays. A research question certainly worth pursuing is whether students trained as peer reviewers in their ESL writing classes are more willing to seek and better able to benefit from peer feedback in their content courses than those without such training.

My survey respondents seem to instinctively appreciate what second language (L2) researchers have only fairly recently begun to examine--the strength of the reading/writing connection. Among L1 reading researchers, it has been known for some time now that there is a positive correlation between amount of reading done and writing proficiency, i.e., the more reading, the better the writer (see Fader & McNeil, 1968; Thorndike, 1973). But not until the past few years, according to Janopoulos (1986), have there been any attempts to find empirical evidence for the same correlation in L2 learners. In Janopoulos' own study, which focused exclusively on international graduate students, those with higher L2 writing proficiency did report that they had done much more pleasure reading in L2 than did students with lower writing proficiency. The next logical step would seem to be to investigate the relationship between amount of serious reading in one's discipline (e.g., for courses, general exams, or a thesis) and writing proficiency in that discipline. Many L1 and L2 compositionists, including Bazerman (1980), Salvatori (1983), and Spack (1985), are, however, already quite convinced of the interconnectedness of writing and reading. "Reading provides

not only a model for writing and a provocation to write but also the very occasion and situation for most writing. Without a sense of the continuity between statements, between reading and writing, students can learn only to create voices calling, and being lost, in the wilderness," Bazerman (1989, p. ix) has observed. International graduate students themselves have considered ability to read field-specific journal articles and papers crucial to academic success at the graduate level, according to a survey conducted almost a decade before mine (Ostler, 1980). Yet, it is probably safe to say that while content-area professors do not automatically assume that their students can write, they do assume that they can read, and thus are not likely to attempt to teach them how to read in the disciplines.

Perhaps the most intriguing and unanticipated finding of my study is the great faith that many of the students that I interviewed have in the advisor/student relationship. I know of no studies of the role played by content-area advisors in the initiation of their nonnative speaker advisees into their disciplinary discourse communities. My interviewees' confidence in the efficacy of their relationships with their advisors certainly raises many questions: Do non-native speakers consciously seek graduate advisors who will be sympathetic and supportive? How do they find these mentors? How do advisors become good mentors for nonnative speakers? Or, does effective mentoring of nonnative speakers in fact differ from that of native speakers? To what extent is content-area advisor mentoring responsible for L2 students' success as writers in their fields? It may be, as suggested earlier, that good intentions and knowledge of the field are not enough. The advisor of one of my interviewees admitted to me that he felt stymied in his efforts to help a very bright advisee with low overall L2 proficiency. James (1984), an ESL tutor at a British university, discovered while serving as "language supervisor" for a dissertation writer that there were many problems in this student's sociology of medicine dissertation--ranging from faulty pronoun referencing to an inappropriate style influenced by a heavily politicized L1 rhetorical tradition--that he had to help the student address. James found himself "often amazed" at the language-related problems that the content-area advisor either was not bothered by or chose to ignore (p. 100).

Spack (1988) is right to caution ESL teachers about the difficulties of teaching writing in the disciplines. Obviously, we cannot respond to discipline-specific writing with the same ease and in the same manner as members of other disciplinary interpretive

communities do. Yet, case studies such as James' show us that even very advanced-level student documents can be intelligently responded to by ESL teachers. Compositionists such as Bazerman (1988) and Halloran (1984) have demonstrated how much of the language and rhetoric of writing in fields as highly specialized as optics and molecular biology can be comprehended and appreciated using "the typical repertoire of the English department," (Bazerman, 1988, p. 3). Composition theory in general appears to be moving away from viewing text as the expression of a single author's thoughts, embodying a single voice, toward a more social constructionist, contextual view of text (Phelps, 1989). Writing teachers are now being encouraged to read student texts as "embedded in and interpenetrating many other discourses" (Phelps, 1989, p. 55). Bartholomae (1986) has observed that students naturally try out many voices and roles when they enter a new discourse community. Can we justify limiting our students' writing to discourses that we are familiar with by arguing that we need to completely understand the subject matter of their texts in order to respond to them? Of course, if we do invite students to write about fields of knowledge that they are attempting to master, we may have to rely on our students as informants (Belcher, 1988; Braine, 1988), to allow them to teach us, a situation which may indeed make some teachers uncomfortable (Spack, 1988). It may well be easier to leave the teaching of writing in various discourses to content-area professors like sociologist Howard Becker. Faced with the task of teaching a writing class to graduate students in sociology, Becker (1986) realized that he had no idea how to teach writing, despite the fact that he had been producing published articles in his field for thirty years. Reflecting on his years of problem- solving as a writer, Becker invented a way to talk about and teach writing, before he discovered that there was a wealth of literature on the subject in a field he had never heard of — composition theory. Becker has since then delved into that literature and also developed his own theory of writing based on research in sociological social psychology (Becker, 1982). My preliminary study on professors' initiation of students into their disciplinary discourse communities suggests that content-area teachers like Howard Becker are the exception to the rule.

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